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The Whale Hunters' Story



COME WITH US TO A PLACE THAT is much darker, much colder, and much more dangerous than wherever you are right now. We are in the far Northwest, along the coast of Alaska, centuries ago. Imagine that along that coast you live in an earthen hut with your close family group of about 30 people. The hut is only 50 feet long and 20 feet wide. There are no windows and there are no doors. Only a

few small holes in the ceiling release the smoke from the whale oil lamps that light and heat our space. To come in and out of this space, we crawl through a tunnel in the floor, out toward the coast. We have reinforced our tunnel with the rib cage bones of a whale.

We are not the only hut along this stretch of the coastline. Several other family huts make up our village. But everyone, in every hut, is doing what we are doing.

Waiting.

We have been waiting since we heard the very first pop, exploding like gunfire, letting us know with a roar that the ice floes are beginning to thaw and spring is near. We have been waiting through the long, dark winter. We have been waiting since the Northern Lights have started to fade and we approach more than four hours of daylight.

In our huts, at the earliest signs of spring, we are waiting for the whales. Every year from late winter to early spring, the whales migrate from far south of us, in what today is Baja, California, to places a little farther north than our village. As they come closer to our village, as they come nearer to the coast, we will hunt them.

Scouting the Whale

Although we know the time of year, we don't know exactly when the whales are coming. So our village sends out scouts. Every boy between the ages of seven and twelve is dispatched along the coast for miles. Well before dawn and long after dusk, the scouts look for the signs of a whale. Every man who is out hunting for caribou, anyone who is fishing in a kayak, is looking out across the coast to see the "whale sign."

It is a difficult place to spot whales. There are few hours of sunlight in a day. The water appears gray. The sky is gray. The land around us is gray. And we are looking for whales. They are gray, too.

You are probably wondering why it would be hard to spot the largest mammal on earth; and probably you have in your mind a picture of a whale spouting or breaching. But if our first glimpse of the whale is when it expels air and water through its blowhole, or when it propels its entire body wholly above the water, we are already too late. It will take too long to launch a boat and catch a whale at this point in its migration. The whales will be way beyond a point where we can catch them. Our scouts need to look for the signs of the whales before they are visible.

Our scouts know that the first sign of whales is the flocks of birds that precede them. The birds feed on the small fish that are swimming north as part of their migration. The small fish are chased by larger fish and still larger fish. Finally will come the whales.

In our village, everyone awaits the news of whale sign. One morning, a boy runs into the village, electrifying us with the news, "I have the whale sign."

Hunting the Whale

You are the harpooner. As the captain of your boat, you rally your shaman and six other oarsmen to lift the boat and launch. Your boat is called an *umiak*. It is 36 feet long, made of cypress wood, and covered in sealskin. That boat is sacred, as is everything related to the whale hunt. It's all been scrubbed down with fresh water from a river some distance away from the village—the boat, the tackle, the harpoon, the line, everything—so as to keep it pure and clean.

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Everything that touches the water for the hunt, everything that touches the whale, must be pure, to observe the tradition of our ancestors.

Now we lift the boat from all sides and launch it into the water. At the front, you sit as the harpooner responsible for directing the boat close to the whale. In the back is the shaman, our spiritual leader, who provides for everyone the tradition and history. The shaman knows which chants to sing, which poems to recite, and which practices to follow to ensure that we have a safe and successful whale hunt.

There are six oarsmen in our boat as well. Each crew member has dual responsibilities: one, to row the boat and, two, to serve the hunt. One minds the tackle. Another minds the line. Several fish and prepare food along the journey. The hunt will take weeks out on the open water, and there is much work to accomplish along the way.

Finally, we spot a whale. The harpooner's job is to direct the boat as close as possible to the whale. Perhaps you can imagine hurling your harpoon toward the whale. But that's a fiction. A 60-pound harpoon would bounce off 100,000 pounds of blubber. We need to get right next to the whale—even jump on top of the whale. And, as harpooner, you have to drive that harpoon in at just the right spot. You have been practicing all winter for just this moment. And you are successful. Your harpoon penetrates deep into the whale's blubber, and your *umiak* is now connected to the whale by a strong line made to withstand the wild and dangerous ride ahead.

Now the whale will do one of three things. It might pull away from the coastline and head deep into the ocean, taking us on a two- to four-day ride in and out of darkness, in and out of ice floes, in a very dangerous place and at a great distance from our village.

Or the whale might dive as deep as 650 feet down into the water. And it can wait, silently, as long as four hours. When it surfaces, it can emerge straight up under our boat, dislodging us. But if you are very skillful, and have put your harpoon in exactly the right place, the whale will pull toward the coastline and run along the coast until it tires. On that four-day run, everyone on the boat has a job. Tending the line is critical. If you let out the line too fast, the whale can get free. If you let it out too slowly, the boat may go under, or the line will break. Anyone who gets tangled in the line will be pulled overboard.

Finally, the whale tires. We pull the boat next to the whale and dispatch it. There is still one more job for a crew member. He needs to jump over the side, into the frigid waters, and sew the whale's mouth shut. If the mouth is left open, the whale fills with water and sinks to the bottom.

Now we must bring this whale to shore. The odds are not in our favor: a 100,000-pound whale against a 3,500-pound boat. Hauling the whale against the tide does not work. Rather, we have to work with the natural forces, the wind and the tide, to steer the whale and beach it.

While we are bringing in the whale, our young scouts are watching the coast to spot our boat. When they see us, they run back to the village to point out where the whale will be beached.

Harvesting the Whale

Everyone in the village heads to the coast as fast as possible. They bring sleds, buckets, and pots. The same tides, the same winds that brought in our whale can take it back out. Left in the open air, the whale will begin to rot. We need to harvest it quickly.

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Once the whale has been beached and secured, the entire community helps with the harvest. From the age of four on, everyone has a job. At four, the children learn to harvest the whale oil from the blubber. Later, they are taught how to harvest the blubber and the skin and the meat. Eventually, they learn to handle the bone. We use every part of the whale, except for its head.

The head is preserved and kept free. When the harvest is over, the boat sets out one more time. It takes the whale's head back out to sea, where it will sink deep within the ocean and be reborn. Our village does not see the whale as a victim of our hunt. Rather, it is a gift from the gods sent to sustain us.

The leaders decide which parts of the whale go to which members of the village. The food is divided based on each one's contribution to the hunt and what the village needs for the coming year.

After all has been divided, we return to our village for a great celebration. But we do not celebrate the great hunters. We do not celebrate the boat or even the harpooner. The celebration is for the whale. The whale is what gives us life and the opportunity to thrive.

Why do we endure such difficulty and danger to hunt whales? People have been killed hunting whales in this manner, century after century. But when we hunt walrus or caribou, seals or a string of fish, we can eat only for a day or a week or two.

A whale can feed our entire village for a year.